

Thursday, October 14, 2004 (SF Chronicle)
A HAND UP/Toward healthier neighborhoods
Angela Glover Blackwell, Robert K. Ross

Where you live often determines how healthy you are. The recent Chronicle series, "Too Young to Die," focused on how certain neighborhood factors contribute to higher rates of infant mortality, noting that certain California neighborhoods have infant-mortality rates comparable to those in Bulgaria and Tonga. Huge disparities also exist between many communities of color and the rest of America on other diseases and afflictions, such as asthma, diabetes, obesity, cancer and heart disease.

This month, PolicyLink and The California Endowment will publish an annotated bibliography with more than 150 entries of groundbreaking research on how a variety of neighborhood factors affect health. One long-term study of West Oakland residents found that just living in the low-income neighborhood was a health risk in its own right, on top of the risks arising from race, income, gender or prior health status. The Chronicle series also documented that in many low-income communities of color, people of all ages suffer disproportionately from asthma, diabetes and other diseases.

Change is possible, but to save and improve people's lives, we must understand the health impacts from living with economic disinvestment, physical decay and social disrespect, and commit to improving neighborhoods.

Doing so requires a new policy framework that breaks out of the narrow notion that all health issues are connected to the delivery of health care. Access to health services is important, but preventing disease requires a focus on policies that affect the quality of neighborhood life.

For example, look at supermarkets, one key aspect of neighborhood commercial activity. Many low-income communities of color do not have full-service supermarkets and therefore residents have limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Not surprisingly, the diets of many of these neighborhood residents tend to be unhealthy, with more calories and fat.

Further, lack of access to healthy foods translates into greater problems with being overweight or obese, which leads to a host of health problems and diseases, such as diabetes and high blood pressure. When there are more commercial options, people make different choices. African Americans' intake of fruits and vegetables increased by 32 percent for each additional supermarket, a recent study by researchers at the University of North Carolina concluded. And, more residents in an African-American neighborhood limited their intake of fat when they had access to a supermarket than residents in a neighborhood without any markets. There can be positive health impacts from a positive neighborhood change.

Equally important is the air people breathe. Too many of the nation's neighborhoods of color have become dumping grounds, home to toxic sites (witness San Francisco's Bayview-Hunters Point). Many of these neighborhoods have dirty air, with high concentrations of diesel pollution and other triggers for asthma. Poor housing stock exposes residents to additional asthma triggers from mold, mildew, dust mites and the allergens associated with cockroaches and rats. Old, rundown schools tend to have poor air, exacerbating children's problems with asthma. In California, more than 1 in 10 children have asthma,

according to a survey by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, but lower-income children of color suffer disproportionately, with as many as 25 percent of children in some communities having the ailment.

There are clear steps to change. California can allocate economic development dollars for the construction of supermarkets in underserved communities, as Pennsylvania did recently. Schools can eliminate the use of pesticides, monitor ventilation systems (the simple step of regular changes of air filters can make a big difference in air quality) and allow children full access to their medications to decrease problems with asthma. In this last legislative session, measures to improve indoor air quality in schools were defeated, but Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed legislation that will at least improve asthmatic children's access to the medications that keep them breathing.

Bold, far-reaching steps are needed that can return economic activity to these neighborhoods, protect communities from dangerous exposures to toxins and enforce Clean Air Act standards. Mobilized communities and better neighborhoods lead to improved health.

Angela Glover Blackwell is president of PolicyLink, a national nonprofit in Oakland working to advance economic and social-equity policies. Robert K. Ross, M.D., is the president and CEO of The California Endowment, one of the country's largest private health foundations that seeks to expand access to affordable health care.

Copyright 2004 SF Chronicle